

Caring for North Dakota's Nongame Species

By Sandra Hagen and Patrick Isakson

Nongame biologist is one of those titles over which people scratch their heads, wondering if you work with wetlands, bugs, or whatever.

Actually, nongame wildlife is defined as all animal species not commonly taken for sport or commercial purposes. In short, a nongame animal is any animal that is not hunted, fished or trapped. In North Dakota, nongame wildlife represents more than 80 percent of the state's vertebrate fauna – more than 300 bird species, roughly 80 kinds of mammals, about 75 fish, 15 reptiles and 11 amphibians. A long list of freshwater mussels, insects, and other small organisms – uncommon and less-studied species – are also considered nongame.

The worth of nongame wildlife is commonly speculated. While these species may not provide the economic or recreation benefits of, say, ring-necked pheasants or walleye, nongame species are important, as they represent an essential component in the balance of nature. Frogs, for example, are food for northern pike and great blue herons. Snakes and hawks help keep rodent populations in check, while bats feast on unwanted, pesky mosquitoes. Nongame species also serve as biological indicators, reflecting the general health of the environment.

Monitoring Nongame Species in North Dakota



Craig Bihrie

Eastern kingbird

In 1987, North Dakota's legislature passed House Bill 1483, which enabled supporters to contribute to the Nongame Wildlife Fund through a state tax check off.

This established

a mechanism for the preservation, inventory and conservation of North Dakota's nongame species. Over the past 14 years, programs have been established to help protect, understand, enjoy and conserve the state's nongame wildlife. However, funding has always been limited.

Conserving Nongame Species Nationally



Craig Bihrie

Killdeer

In 1999, legislation known as the Conservation and Reinvestment Act was introduced to federal lawmakers without success. This legislation would have reinvested a portion of revenue from federal

offshore oil and natural gas leases into state, federal and local conservation programs such as wildlife restoration, parks and outdoor recreation. Since the mid-1950s, all the revenue, about \$4.5 billion annually,

collected from oil and gas leases in the Outer Continental Shelf has been sent to the federal treasury. Annually, CARA would have guaranteed \$3.1 billion of this revenue for 15 years for use nationwide for a variety of conservation purposes.

Since CARA was first introduced in 1999, Congress has either not taken action on the legislation, or has put off endorsing it due to the current budget situation and deficit spending. However, CARA maintains strong support from many federal lawmakers.



Ed Bry

Burrowing owls

Alternative Nongame Funding

Although CARA would have provided secure, long-term funding for nongame wildlife conservation in North Dakota, the North Dakota Game and Fish Department and other state wildlife agencies were not left empty handed. Temporary funding has been established to address basic CARA-like concerns.

In 2001, the federal government approved \$50 million for distribution to states, District of Columbia, U.S. Territories, and the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico. This was known as the Wildlife Conservation

and Restoration Program. This funding was for wildlife conservation, education and recreation. The amount each state received varied based on land area and population.

In 2002, another round of funding totaling \$80 million was awarded and distributed in a similar manner. This round of funding is known as State Wildlife Grants and the money is primarily for wildlife conservation. Recently, Congress approved \$65 million in SWG for 2003 and the campaign to approve funding for 2004 is underway.

Game and Fish Department's Role

In order to receive these funds, the Department agreed to develop a Comprehensive Wildlife Conservation Plan by 2005. This plan will include a list of all nongame vertebrate species found in the state

along with their distribution, abundance, and a description of what habitat they require. Also, a list of sensitive species – species in the greatest need of conservation – will be developed. Once these lists and descriptions have been developed, conservation goals will be determined.

The Department has hired two nongame biologists, Sandra Hagen and Patrick Isakson, to write the state's CWCP and head nongame studies. In developing the conservation plan, the Department has identified numerous species in need of study.

The first work funded by SWG was a



Craig Bihrie

Prairie dog

black-tailed prairie dog survey. Recently, this small mammal created great interest throughout the United States when it was listed as a candidate species under the Endangered Species Act. The survey was conducted to gather more information to assess North Dakota's population. Colonies were counted and total prairie dog acreage was estimated. The survey was completed in 2002, confirming the state's prairie dog population does not appear to be threatened with extinction.

The Department is also helping fund a grassland bird modeling study. This study, through the University of Montana, is being conducted over a five-state area, including parts of the Dakotas, Minnesota, Montana and Iowa. Work in North Dakota will be done east of the Missouri River in the Prairie Pothole Region. Key areas used by grassland nesting birds, such as the Savannah sparrow, western meadowlark, northern harrier, and many others will be identified. Concern over the status of grassland birds on the Northern Great Plains has increased in recent years with many species experiencing population declines. This project will provide the Department with a better idea of what grassland habitat exists and its importance to grassland nesting birds.

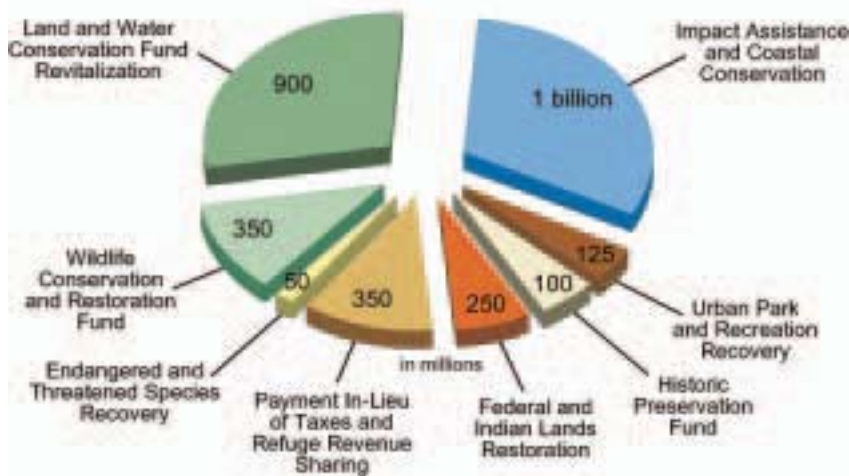
A third study started earlier this spring will look at the status of golden eagles in southwestern North Dakota. Ann Marguerite Coyle, a Ph.D candidate from the University of North Dakota, is conducting this study in cooperation with the U.S. Forest Service. Coyle will try to locate golden eagle nests from the air to determine how many pairs call the badlands home. Each nest will be monitored for three summers to determine success. Other information, such as prey and nest site selection, will be collected to help us better understand these large prairie raptors.

North Dakota's nongame species are a diverse group, ranging from seldom-seen small mammals and amphibians of the prairies and wetlands, to more recognizable bird species found at backyard feeders. With the help of federal and state wildlife agencies, university researchers, and other partners, the Game and Fish Department will continue to work to develop a conservation plan that maintains the state's rich mix of native fauna.

SANDRA HAGEN and PATRICK ISAKSON are nongame biologists for the Game and Fish Department.

Proposed Nationwide CARA Funding

If CARA were to pass, it would provide \$3.1 billion of federal offshore oil and gas lease revenue to be distributed annually among states for a variety of conservation projects.



Land and Water Conservation Fund Revitalization – supports creation of national, state, and local parks, forests, wildlife refuges, and open spaces for outdoor conservation and recreation. Will safeguard private landowners with a “willing seller” clause and other requirements for federal acquisitions.

Impact Assistance and Coastal Conservation – establishes a coastal conservation fund for 35 coastal states to conserve, restore, enhance, or create coastal habitats, to collect data about fisheries and marine mammals, to mitigate marine and coastal impacts of OCS activities, and to promote research, education, and training in marine resources.

Wildlife Conservation and Restoration Fund – assists state fish and wildlife agencies to manage diverse array of wildlife and associated habitats through state wildlife conservation and restoration projects, to enhance outdoor recreation projects, and to promote conservation education.

Urban Park and Recreation Recovery – a matching grant program for local governments to create new recreational programs, sites, and buildings and to improve existing recreation areas and facilities.

Historic Preservation Fund – funds to manage and maintain the National Register of Historic Places and to develop preservation projects on historic properties.

Federal and Indian Lands Restoration – funds to restore degraded federal and Indian lands and preserve resources threatened with degradation and to protect public health and safety.

Endangered and Threatened Species Recovery – funds to provide incentives to private landowners for the recovery of threatened and endangered species on their land.

Payment In-Lieu of Taxes and Refuge Revenue Sharing – compensates local governments for losses to their tax base when the federal government occupies land for natural resource purposes, such as a national forest, park or refuge. Under the Refuge Revenue Sharing Act, all revenues from refuge products such as timber and minerals or from leases such as grazing fees shall be distributed to local governments.

Meadowlark

Craig Bhrte

